Palaung language and identity

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Abstract: The Palaung (or Ta'ang), whose languages belong to the Austroasiatic family, live on mountain slopes and ridges in Shan State, adjacent Yunnan, and northern Thailand. In addition to the Burmese term 'Palaung' (perhaps itself connected to Blang and Bulang, names of another Austroasiatic group), insiders and outsiders have used a number of other names to refer to all or some of the Palaung. Besides the names Kojima outlines in his article in this Focus, the Burmese refer to the Samlong as 'Shwe' (Burmese for 'gold'), and the Rucing as 'Ngwe' (Burmese for 'silver'). These terms have their origins in the decorations on women's clothing. The Rumai are sometimes called 'Black Palaung', as the cloth of the women's dresses is mainly black. In terms of language, these three names also indicate varieties that are not immediately mutually intelligible.

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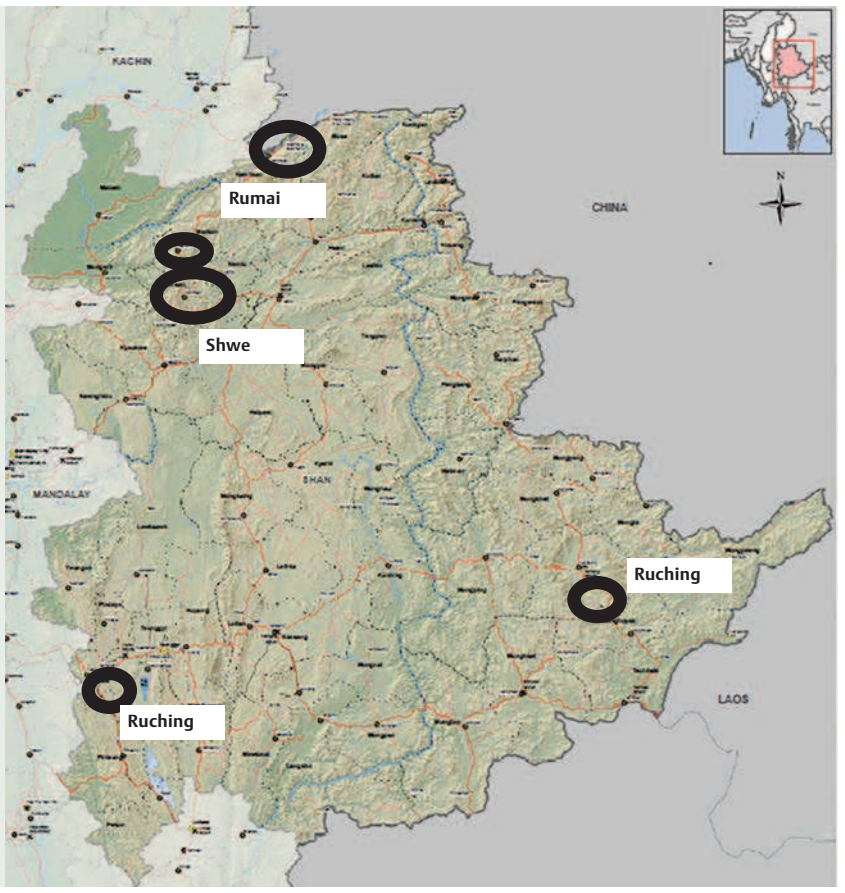

Top:
Areas where Palaung is spoken in Shan State, Myanmar.

Language variation

Many Palaung claim they all speak the same language, which they call Ta'ang, and that there is no variation. Such claims reflect ideology more than reality. For the past several years, I have conducted research on the various Palaung languages, making use both of published sources and conducting fieldwork with native speakers in Mandalay, Yangon, and Shan State.[1] Shwe, Rumai, and Rucing each vary in lexicon and considerably in grammar, and within each group, there is substantial dialectal variation. Given how scattered the Palaung communities are throughout a mountainous area, this is not surprising. The Rucing in particular live at a significant distance from the other groups. To understand just how different the varieties of Palaung are, consider the following sentences, all of which mean, 'this is not my house', with the word for 'house' in bold letters:

Samlong: *ʔɯ ka mɤh cĭ* ***gaŋ*** *ʔɔ*
Rumai: *pă nîn ʔaw moh mă* ***kʰəlɛp*** *ʔêw*
Rucing: *ʔaw muh* ***kaŋ*** *ʔo ni*

In Rumai, the word *gâŋ* also exists for house, similar to the other two languages, but speakers think of it as old-fashioned. To think in terms of grammar and structure, each of the sentences translates roughly as 'this not be house my'. The way speakers make the sentence negative differs slightly in each language. In Shwe and Rucing, speakers put the negation before the verb (*ka* and *ʔaw*, respectively), but in Rumai, they add another negator after the verb, *mă*. The sound systems of the languages also differ. Rumai, for example, appears to have a falling tone, at least in some dialects. The other Palaung varieties, like most of the Austroasiatic languages generally, are not tonal.

Most Palaung are multilingual. Traditionally their second language was Shan, but since independence and the introduction of the public school system, Burmese has gained more ground. Multilingualism has led to the influence of the dominant languages into Palaung varieties.

Understanding language variation

Language variation among the Palaung reflects not only physical distance and geographical barriers, but differences in ecological niche and therefore social system. Social hierarchy and elevation are usually inverted in upland Southeast Asia: groups living in the plains or mountain valleys occupy very similar positions in terms of their economics (wet-rice based), religious systems (Buddhism), tending to have complex societies (historically, with royalty and courts), whereas peoples living at higher altitudes tend to have small, less differentiated societies, which have a lower overall social status. The geographical location of most Palaung settlements implies a low social status, lower than that of the Shan who live in the valleys and the plains of the mountains.

Edmund Leach, whose name in Burma Studies is associated with the connections between Kachin and Shan groups, had the insight that certain crops are closely associated with ritual and therefore religious orientation. He found that when Kachins, who are an upland people growing dry rice and other upland crops, took up wet-rice agriculture, as is the normal practice among the Shans, those Kachins quickly became embedded in the various rituals and Buddhist practices associated with that economic-ecological niche. Unlike the Kachin, the Palaung are largely Buddhist, but Leach's insights into what happens among some Kachin may reveal a larger dynamic going on when members of upland societies shift their livelihoods to that of their low(er)-land neighbors.

Most lowland Burmese associate the Palaung with tea cultivation, and indeed, tea has raised the economic level of the Shwe and Rumai to as high as, and sometimes higher than, that of the surrounding Shan.[2] Rucings live at altitudes low enough that they grow less tea, but are able to grow wet rice and more cash crops. The connection between economics, wealth, some kind of social variation and language merit further investigation.

Following the idea of the importance of cultural orientation and connections with Shan models, we find that in Tawng Peng, one of the former Shan principalities whose capital is Nam Hsan, Samlong-speaking Palaung *saopha* (Burmese *sawbwa*) ruled for about two hundred years until shortly after the independence.[3] The Shwe are highly Shanified and have the highest prestige among the Palaung groups. The Rumai and Rucing, in contrast, have never ruled over anyone else, and have only a headman in each village.

Creating a common Palaung identity

The three Palaung groups I have considered here differ in various ways: in their language, economic niche, where they live, and the level of prestige they have relative to their neighbors. As described elsewhere in this *Focus,* Palaung elites have tried to create a common script and language. They have also created a common Palaung flag. All of these markers fit in with Burma-wide practices of creating and maintaining an ethnic identity.

Above:
Palaung Family, Shan State, 2016

Left:
Palaung monk, Mandalay, 2016.

Photos courtesy of author.

Ethnic groups 'should' have their own language and script, their own written history, a distinct dress, and numerous distinctive cultural practices. There is a widespread fear among ethnic elites in Burma that they are in danger of disappearing. One aspect of this concern is that a lack of unity will result in disappearance; this is quite similar to the rhetoric of the previous Burmese military government.

We may reflect on the question of the extent to which, historically, 'the Palaung' did or did not consider themselves to be connected at all. It is possible that in the 'ethnicized' and 'ethnicizing' environment of Myanmar today, elite groups feel the pressure to create content to ethnic categories that have been ascribed to them. As among other ethnic groups, Palaung elites, largely Shwe, speak of a struggle of autonomy against Burmese and Shan domination. As in other cases in Burma, it is not clear how far below the elite level these sentiments reach or are being acted upon. Whether these Palaung groups will achieve unity is unclear.

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References

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